

Alma Jeftić. 2019. *Social Aspects of Memory: Stories of Victims and Perpetrators from Bosnia-Herzegovina*, London: Routledge, 2019. 168 pp. ISBN: 978-0-415-78955-4 (Hardcover), ISBN: 978-1-315-22267-7 (eBook), £52.99/£16.99

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In *Social Aspects of Memory: Stories of Victims and Perpetrators from Bosnia-Herzegovina*, Alma Jeftić examines delicate narratives of two generations of Bosniaks and Serbs, victims and perpetrators. The author explores how members of two ethnic groups in three different sociopolitical contexts—Bosniaks from Sarajevo, Serbs from Sarajevo and Serbs from East Sarajevo—remember the 1992–95 Siege of Sarajevo. Jeftić also discusses the memory of those not directly exposed to the armed conflict but who have been heavily influenced by the way their parents and grandparents remember the past. She describes how such second-hand experiences—together with geography, propaganda, and ethnicity—form personal and collective memories of historical events. The main aim of the book, along with its scholarly contribution, seems to be to facilitate and promote the process of reconciliation and/or healing. This is especially emphasised with Jeftić’s concluding thoughts on how to use empathy development in that process.

The book consists of four chapters, the longest explaining the methodology and results of the author’s study. Indeed, a novel aspect of this study is Jeftić’s use of mixed methods in investigating this complicated social issue. By using both qualitative and quantitative methods, the researcher was able to look at the issue from several angles and to unveil connections between the various analytical levels of her topic. Jeftić interviewed ordinary people from Sarajevo, the multi-ethnic capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and East Sarajevo, a municipality connected to the canton of Sarajevo but divided by the entity line, so that it is almost exclusively monoethnic, i.e. populated by Serbs, in order to examine how different groups remember the same event. For her study, she chose four events from the Siege of Sarajevo that she thought would best represent the suffering of both ethnicities: the Markale market shelling, the “breadline” massacre in Vase Miskina street, the Kazani pit killings, and the NATO bombardment of the Army of Republika Srpska (*Vojska Republike Srpske*, VRS), also known as “Operation Deliberate Force”. The real highlight of this study is the insight into the collective

memory of the youth. Jeftić shows how high school/university students remember the events that they have not lived through themselves. Her study is thus a valuable addition to the young and growing field of transgenerational/intergenerational/multigenerational transmission of memories, more specifically traumas.

The somewhat surprising and confusing part of the book is the introductory chapter, where the author talks about the history of Sarajevo, from its founding days in the fifteenth century until the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995. She focuses on a detailed description of two unrelated events that took place in Sarajevo: the 1914 assassination of Austro-Hungarian Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie and the 1984 Winter Olympic Games. Jeftić uses these two events as examples of how different regimes and ideologies employed them in the formation of collective narratives. This leads to an introduction that lacks a description of the event on which the book focuses, that is the Siege of Sarajevo, the longest one in the history of modern warfare. Sarajevo was besieged first by the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) and subsequently by the VRS for 1425 days. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) convicted several Serbian officials for crimes against humanity committed during the Siege. During the four years of the Siege, the city endured indiscriminate daily sniping, shelling, and bombardments, resulting in the deaths of more than 11,000 men, women, and children of all ages. None of these facts are included in the book as the reader jumps from the year 1984 straight into postwar 1996 and is left wondering what happened in between. Even though this is not a history book, some historical context should have been provided for the sake of readers who are just learning about the breakup of Yugoslavia and the subsequent aggression and wars.

If one is looking for a book that is concerned with historical facts and the truth about the Siege of Sarajevo and the 1992–95 war of aggression against Bosnia and Herzegovina, then they should keep looking because this is not that kind of book. The author focuses on realities constructed in the minds of both the perpetrators and their victims. Truth is nowhere to be found as confusion and nationalism intertwine. As it floats in the vacuum between truth and politically constructed lies, *Social Aspects of Memory* tries to maintain its “neutrality”. For example, the author suggests that Bosnia and Herzegovina should “ensure the organization of memorials and commemorations that is not offensive to any side” (124). But truth is not offensive and it should not be hindered for the sake of reconciliation. Remembrance without clear distinction between victims and perpetrators opens doors to various kinds of information manipulation, revision of historical facts, denial, and victim blaming. It is well known that in a post-genocidal society, which Bosnia and Herzegovina is, there is no such thing as neutrality. Relativism and “all sides are equally guilty” rhetoric serves only war criminals and their supporters,

while victims suffer even more due to lack of acknowledgement of their loss and pain.

In the final chapter of the book, Jeftić talks about reconciliation, more specifically about how empathy could be used to aid it. The problem with that notion is that Bosnia and Herzegovina has not yet healed. Daily glorification of war criminals and genocide, constant denial, and historical revisionism are standing in the way of a true reconciliation. Anyone who starts a quest for ways to heal historical trauma will realise that there is no single recipe that individuals and communities should follow. Every mass trauma is a story of its own; what the European Jews went through during the Holocaust or Ukrainians during the Holodomor is not the same as what Bosniaks went through during the aggression towards Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, all of these victims want the same: recognition of their suffering—and justice.

The answers provided by the participants of this study are somewhat disheartening. Nevertheless, Jeftić's qualitative research in *Social Aspects of Memory* provides an intimate insight into the very core of the parallel worlds that exist in post-genocidal Bosnia and Herzegovina. Even though they are highly problematic, they represent the reality that affects the everyday life of most citizens living there.